



ISBN: 978-0-7636-4341-6

Eli the Good

BY SILAS HOUSE

“The first true
day of summer
for me began
with a scream.”
—*Eli*

ABOUT THE BOOK

It's the summer of 1976, and America is celebrating its two hundredth birthday with a bang. But fireworks are nothing new at Eli's house. His beautiful mother and headstrong sister are fighting pitched battles, his father is wrestling with demons from the Vietnam War, and his rambling aunt has finally come home, looking for a place to fade away. In this tender and timeless novel by an acclaimed author — his first for young people — an unforgettable ten-year-old peels back his family's secrets as he takes his first steps toward manhood.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There are two Elis in this story: a ten-year-old in 1976 and a grown-up narrator recalling that pivotal summer. Why do you think the author structured his novel this way? Beyond their ages, how does each Eli differ from the other?
2. “The trees,” says Eli’s friend Edie, “they talk to you if you listen hard enough” (page 11). What does Eli learn about himself from the trees? What does he learn about his father?
3. Examine the seven photographs that Eli’s father sends home from Vietnam. What does each photo reveal about this man’s character and about his experiences in the war?
4. Why are Josie’s flag pants so important to her? Why does her mother loathe them?
5. What makes Eli and Edie kindred spirits? Why won’t he admit that she’s his best friend? How does he betray her on the Fourth of July? How does she respond?
6. Eli’s mother was never a soldier, but her son believes that “she lived with Vietnam stamped across her face as much as our father did” (page 23). What does he mean by that?
7. At the beginning of the summer, thinking about himself and other children of Vietnam veterans, Eli muses, “we’re always caught between defending our fathers and not understanding them” (page 62). Does he feel the same way at the end of the summer? What changes for him?
8. Both Eli and his sister, Josie, resent their mother’s deep devotion to their father. Why? What do they want from her? Are their hard feelings justified?
9. Describing his father, Eli says: “he was usually silent about everything, which is most likely why he stayed on the edge of explosion all the time (page 102).” Is Eli right? Can talk defuse fury?
10. Eli is an eavesdropper and a sneak, and his mother and his best friend know all about it and don’t approve. Why does he keep doing it? Is it a character flaw? Is it good training for an aspiring writer?

“Only the
rocks live
forever.”

—*Nell*, quoting
James Michener

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS *(continued)*

11. “Like everyone else in our family,” Eli says about his aunt Nell, “she was carrying a secret with her” (page 37). Discuss the secrets in Eli’s family. Which are the most damaging? Which are the easiest to understand?
12. Eli is reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*. What attracts him to the book? How does it inspire him? Why does its tragic ending make him feel more hopeful?
13. “All of the world’s biggest problems boil down to misunderstandings,” says Nell (page 216), but Eli’s mother disagrees. What do you believe? Is misunderstanding the root of all conflict?
14. “Sometimes the best families of all are those that we create ourselves,” Eli observes (page 144). What does he mean by that? Does Eli create his own family?
15. Eli’s father is a sick man, sometimes even a dangerous man, but his wife won’t take him to a doctor, despite Nell’s pleading. Why? Why does she also refuse to disguise her bruises?
16. Of all the things that Eli’s father could have destroyed, why is the old guitar the worst? What is its significance, especially to Eli’s mother and his aunt? What is the importance of music in their lives?
17. Why did Nell leave home when she was a teenager? Why does she return home in 1976 as a grown woman? Why can’t she stay?
18. Playing with his aunt, Eli decrees that his royal name should be “Eli the Great.” But Nell suggests “Eli the Good.” Why? Does either title suit the boy?
19. The epilogue carries the story of Eli and his family into the present. In what ways has each character remained unchanged over the years? How has each changed significantly?
20. After you finish the last paragraph of *Eli the Good*, return to its first. How well does it summarize the novel? What important plot developments does it include? What does it leave out?

“I need to
tell you
something
that I
shouldn’t.”

—*Letter from
Vietnam*

PRAISE FOR *ELI THE GOOD*

An American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults
Nominee

“Truly remarkable. House’s writing is almost poetic in its beauty, and he is able to invoke a sense of time and place to which readers young and old can relate.” —*ForeWord*

“Cannily distills a child’s experience of an endless summer. Its slow burn belies the drama that only periodically, but powerfully, cracks the surface. An intelligent, nostalgic challenge to those who insist teen readers won’t read about kids younger than them.” —*Booklist*

“An important story about war’s hold on soldiers and their families. Readers will want to keep an eye out for future works by this talented writer.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“Sometimes
just being
still is the
best thing
you can do
for yourself.”
—*Eli*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in eastern Kentucky, where he still lives with his daughters, Silas House has written three previous novels for adults: *Clay’s Quilt*, *A Parchment of Leaves*, and *The Coal Tattoo*. He is also a playwright, an environmental activist, and a writer in residence at Lincoln Memorial University, where he also directs the Mountain Heritage Literary Festival.

About *Eli the Good*, he says, “This book is about the power of friendship and the joy of accepting yourself *as you are*. It’s also about how people can get through struggles if they have hope and the love of others, and most important, it’s about the fact that we don’t always have to agree with the ones we love. Finally, it is about the way a war lives on in people long after it’s over. Although the book is set in 1976, it’s also about right now. What I like about Eli most is that he’s trying so hard to be a good person, which is what most of us are doing all the time, especially when we are kids.”



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